

MEMORANDUM

TO: INTERESTED PARTIES
FROM: ROBERT BLIZZARD
DATE: DECEMBER 13, 2021
RE: ACCOUNTABILITY IN K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION



On behalf of the Walton Family Foundation, Public Opinion Strategies (R) completed a national survey among N=2,500 registered voters (credibility interval $\pm 2.23\%$) October 18-26, 2021, in conjunction with ALG Research (D). The purpose of this memo is to review some of the key findings from this survey.

BOTTOM LINE

Policymakers, specifically Republican elected officials in state capitals across the country, should not allow the negative political environment or deep concerns about the quality of K-12 public education cloud the importance voters place on having strong accountability in schools.

There is high, and deep, support for student testing in K-12 public education. As a result, elected officials across the country should ignore the noise and instead focus on what the lion's share of voters are saying – test students each year to assess progress in reading, writing, and math, and look for opportunities to improve the way states can measure student progress in the future. Voters want testing to be fixed, not ended.

KEY FINDINGS

- ***Americans are negative about the direction of the country, and that feeling extends to attitudes toward public schools – especially in the aftermath of COVID-19.*** As we have seen echoed in other national polling, by a two-to-one margin, voters believe the country is off on the wrong track (63%) rather than moving in the right direction (30%).

Further, a plurality of Americans believe public schools in their state are off on the wrong track (44%), and only 13% of voters believe the quality of education in their state's public schools has gotten better over the last few years – including just 9% of Republican voters and just 8% of 2020 Trump voters.

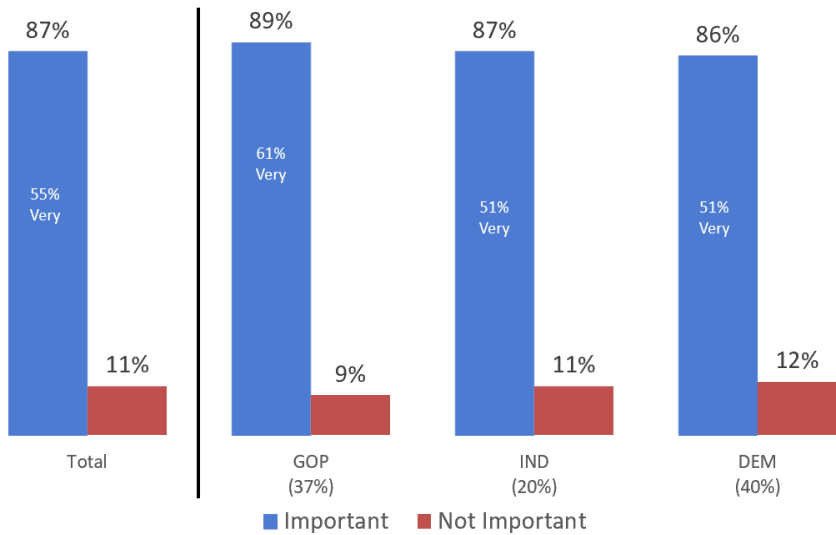
- ***The post-COVID 19 landscape strongly favors education reform as voters desire changes to get students back on track.*** Most parents across the country (and most Republican parents) express frustration with how their child's school handled the COVID-19 crisis. More than two-thirds (68%) of parents across the country believe their children began the year behind due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including 70% of Republican parents.

As a result, Americans across party lines believe that schools need to make changes to get students back on track. (Fully 57% of GOP voters believe schools to make "***bold***" or "***some changes***" and adopt new ways of doing things.)

- **But, even with the desire for change, voters overwhelmingly believe it is important to test students each year to assess progress in reading, writing, and math.** Voters are crystal clear: testing is very important.

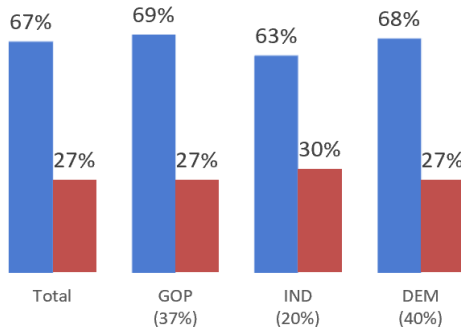
By an overwhelming 87%-11% margin, voters across the country say it is important to test students each year to make sure they are progressing and reaching grade level.

How important is it to test students each year to assess if they are progressing in reading, writing, and math and reaching grade level?

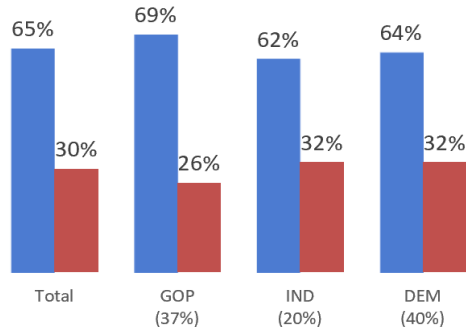


- **Even when pushed with arguments from those who want to eliminate testing, voters across party lines side with the idea that,** though test need of improvement, they provide important information for families and teachers.

State tests are imperfect, but they provide important information about how students are doing academically. ...or is it...
State tests don't mean much to parents, and they find other ways to understand their child's academic progress.

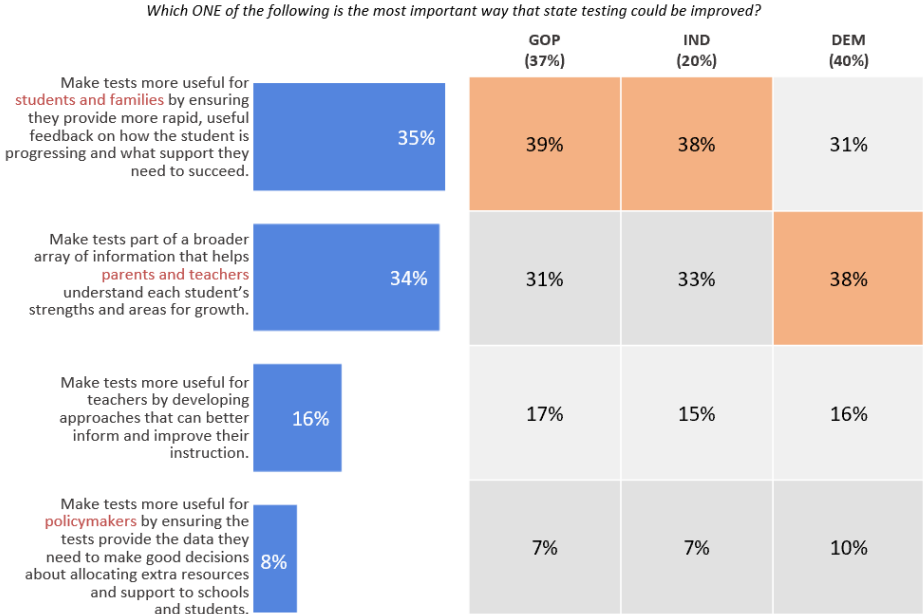


State tests are imperfect, but without it, parents and teachers won't know where students are succeeding and where they need help. ...or is it...
There are just too many high stakes state tests in schools and the stress that it puts on our students is just too much.



- **“Fix them, not end them.”** Fully 83% of all voters and 82% of Republican voters rate this message as a convincing reason to test students each year to assess if they are progressing in reading, writing, and math and reaching grade level: “Though these tests may not be perfect, we should fix them, not end them. Rather than just ending testing, students, parents, educators, and policymakers in our state should have a real review to see what is working, what isn't, and how we can change these important tests to meet the needs of students and educators.”

- All voters – and especially Republicans – believe testing is part of life.** More than three-quarters of voters (77%) and Republican voters (81%) rate this message as a convincing reason to test students each year to assess if they are progressing in reading, writing, and math and reaching grade level: “Doctors, nurses, teachers, mechanics, and airline pilots all have to pass tests to enter the profession. Testing is part of life. That’s why being able to learn and absorb information and then reflect that knowledge on a test is so important, no matter what career a student aspires to.”
- Looking forward, Americans, and Republicans, say accountability can be improved by making testing more responsive to students, parents, and teachers, rather than primarily focusing on testing to inform policymakers.** A plurality of Americans, and Republican and Independent voters, believe the most important way state testing could be improved is to: “Make tests more useful for students and families by ensuring they provide more rapid, useful feedback on how the student is progressing and what support they need to succeed.”



- Finally, voters across the country want tests to be part of an array of information to help understand student strengths and growth opportunities – not to ensure equitable outcomes.** Nearly half of all voters (46%) and Republican voters (49%) specifically say the most important way to improve how state tests are used or implemented is to: “Ensure tests are used as a tool for improvement, not as a tool for punishment.”

In contrast, just 23% of all voters and only 14% of Republican voters believe it is important to: “Ensure tests are used to advance equitable outcomes for all students, especially low-income students and students of color.”